

Good homemade jerky

By Charles A. Sanders

Jerky was once a common and vital trail food. This was because jerky is light—it weighs about one quarter the amount of fresh meat—and, if stored so it is protected from moisture, it can easily last through a year. Jerky could also be eaten without the need for preparing a fire or using utensils, which would slow down the traveler. Many a frontier traveler merely shaved or gnawed off a chunk of jerky and chewed while walking or riding.

Traditionally, jerky is merely strips of thinly sliced meat that have been dried. Usually, the meat was hung to air dry on wooden racks. Sometimes, where insects or humidity were a problem, a low smoky fire was built under the drying meat. The smoke, from burning just about any hardwood, imparted flavor, kept the bugs away, and perhaps helped in the preservation process as well. The low fire was important because too much heat would cook the meat instead of allowing it to dry.

Today hikers find jerky lightweight, satisfying, and easy to carry. Hunters often carry some for a quick snack or lunch. I sometimes take a few pieces along when I'm out cutting wood. Whatever the reason, jerky is still a versatile, tasty, and nutritious food. It is a good way to preserve venison or beef or other good, lean meat. In fact, here at our place, we have been digging down into the bottom of the freezer, cleaning it out in preparation to have another beef butchered and I am using up some roasts and other cuts by converting them to jerky.

I've made jerky the traditional way, cutting and drying thin strips of meat from which the fat, sinew, and membranes had been trimmed, and it was marinated overnight. Each strip of meat was then pierced near one end with a toothpick and the strips were then hung from a wire oven rack that I had suspended above our woodstove.

I recommend using frozen meat to make jerky. There are many parasites that exist in both domestic and wild animals that can be transmitted to humans. Freezing of the meat helps to kill the critters.

As a rule of thumb, meat that is less than an inch thick should be frozen for about 30 days. Thicker pieces should be frozen for 60 days before making them into jerky. In fact,

when we are getting ready to have a new beef butchered, we go through the freezer and use the remaining packages of beef to make some jerky because we know they have been frozen for well over the 60-day period.

Slice the trimmed meat into long thin strips about $\frac{1}{4}$ inch thick. It is important that as much fat as possible be trimmed away as fat will not allow the jerky to dry as thoroughly as it should and fatty jerky will not keep as well

either as the fat itself may turn rancid. If you work with the meat before it is completely thawed, it will be much easier to slice. Slice the strips with the grain or along the length of the muscle fibers to make chewy jerky. Cut across the grain, or across the muscles, to end up with more tender jerky. I personally prefer the cross-grain slices.

For most of us, the thought of eating jerky that has been merely sliced up and dried doesn't sound too appealing. Unseasoned and dried beef or deer strips taste a bit bland. In fact, the first time or two I made jerky, I under-seasoned the meat and it lacked the flavor I was hoping for. On the other hand, I added far too much black pepper to some antelope jerky once. It would make your eyes water. To save you some of the same trouble, below are some good ways to prepare the meat before drying.

Three jerky marinades

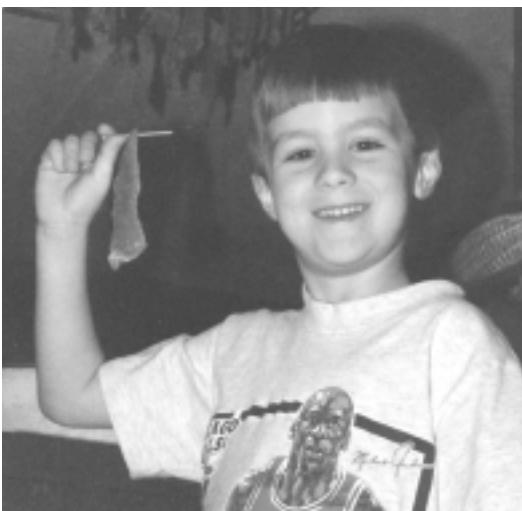
When preparing the jerky from strips of meat, a good marinade is recommended. Here are some good marinades for soaking your jerky strips in prior to drying.

Easy jerky marinade:

1 cup pickling salt
1 gallon water

Mix the brine well, allow the strips to soak for about 24 hours. Pat them dry and place in the dryer.

Many folks prefer their jerky slightly spiced or peppered. This is pretty much a matter of preference, particularly when using hot peppers. Here are two good marinades for spicier jerky. For these two recipes, just mix all the ingredients together and marinate the meat for roughly two hours, but no more than three hours or the jerky will be too strong.



The author's son holds a strip of meat ready to place on the drying rack.

Seasoned jerky marinade (for one pound of meat):

½ cup soy sauce
1 Tbsp. Worcestershire sauce
½ tsp. black pepper
¼ tsp. ground hot pepper
¼ tsp. garlic powder
½ tsp. onion powder
1 tsp. hickory smoke-flavored salt

Cajun-spiced jerky (for one pound of meat):

¼ cup soy sauce
½ tsp. black pepper
¼ tsp. garlic powder
1 tsp. salt
2 tsp. Cajun spice

The squirt-gun method

Not all jerky is made from sliced strips of meat. A new twist on jerky making involves using a device that looks like a cross between a cake decorator and a caulking gun. This jerky gun squirts out a neat, uniform strip of meat for drying. The method works well but does require running the meat through a grinder to allow it to be pushed through the gun. There are a couple of ways to do this. If you have an old crank sausage grinder, it will do a fine job. I opted for modern technology and used the electric food processor. It did a great job. Either appliance should turn out meat minced fine enough for squirting through the gun. Using this method, the resulting strips of jerky are a little more manageable to eat, having been made from tiny bits of ground meat, rather than a single strip of meat fibers. There are a few manufacturers of these devices. The one I used is made by American Harvest.

I used a home blend as described above on one batch of jerky, and I used seasonings provided with the gun in another. Both were good. I believe it just depends upon your preferences.

When using the meat marinades given above, cut back on the amount of liquid listed when using the gun. Since you will be mixing the spices and other ingredients right in with the ground meat, the drier it is the better and quicker it will dry.

Drying the jerky

As I mentioned, I've made a lot of good jerky by hanging strips of meat from an old oven rack I suspended above the woodstove. This general method does a first-rate job and is preferred by many people. Naturally, if you do not have a food dryer or do not live in a climate with sufficiently low humidity, this will be a really good method to try.



Using the jerky gun to lay out strips of beef on a rack to go in the author's dehydrator

When drying your jerky, first dry it for an hour at about 160 to 180 degrees F. It is important, though, not to get the meat too hot. After that first hour, adjust the heat source itself, or the distance of the meat from the heat source, so that it runs from about 140 to 160 degrees F. Remember, you do not want to cook it. Keep an eye on it to test it for readiness.

The key is to heat the meat slowly enough to dry it without overcooking. If you heat too fast, the outside gets crusty while the inside is not dry enough. But you need to heat the meat quickly enough to get the moist meat out of the danger zone of infestation by bacteria (40 degrees to 140 degrees F is the danger zone) as quickly as possible.

You can test your jerky to see when it has become dry enough by just breaking a piece of it. Take a piece from the dryer or rack and allow it to cool. Then just break the piece in two. It should not break cleanly, that is, snap in two. Rather it should bend and then sort of splinter and break, much as a green stick might. Give it another few hours after that. Remember, though, that overdrying is preferred to underdrying. With the latter, any retained moisture could allow bacterial growth and spoilage.

When the jerky is sufficiently dried, remove it from the heat. If there are beads of oil present, pat the strips dry with a paper towel. I then store the jerky in large plastic zip bags and put them in the freezer. That is not essential, but it adds storage life to the finished product. At least be sure to keep the jerky in a sealed container. Dried jerky takes up moisture readily. Even if you dry jerky enough to prevent growth of microorganisms, over time the meat could reabsorb enough moisture to allow microorganisms to grow again.

Making jerky is a practical method for preserving meat. Once you try making your own jerky, those small overpriced jerky strips found in the convenience store will seem much less appealing. Δ